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Russell & Erwin Building  
(Russwin Hotel, New Britain City Hall)  
27 W. Main Street  
New Britain  
Hartford County  
Connecticut

HABS No. CT-2

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

Name: Russell & Erwin Building

Secondary Names: Russwin Hotel  
New Britain City Hall

Location: 27 West Main Street  
New Britain  
Hartford County  
Connecticut

Present Owner: City of New Britain

Present Use: City Hall

Significance: Built by two men who were leaders in the local hardware industry, the Russell & Erwin Building was a symbol of the growing prosperity of New Britain as the "Hardware Center of the World." Its skillful Italian Renaissance Revival design was the work of Joseph Morrill Wells of McKim, Mead & White New York's leading architectural firm. It was the only commission during Wells' career for which he had entire responsibility. Since 1909, when it became the City Hall, the structure has functioned as the seat of city government.

## PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Designs were begun in July of 1883. Construction was carried out through 1884 to the end of 1885.<sup>1</sup>

2. Architect: Joseph Morrill Wells of the firm of McKim, Mead and White. While there are no signed plans, the attribution to Wells is firm, on the authority of three scholars.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph Morrill Wells (1853-1890) was born in Boston where he attended public schools. As a young man he secured employment with Clarence S. Luce and Peabody & Stearns, then moved to New York where he worked for Richard M. Hunt before joining McKim, Mead & White. His promising career was cut short by death at the age of 37.<sup>3</sup>

3. Builder: Albert W. Scoville of Hartford.<sup>4</sup> Merwin & Stiles of Berlin Depot furnished 300,000 bricks.
4. Original plans and construction: There are no original plans. Copies of bills for the building are in the records of McKim, Mead & White at the New-York Historical Society.

The building initially was constructed in the form of a square approximately 93 feet on each side with a 20 x 33-foot light well in the rear, off center to the left. (See Sketch Map.)

5. Alterations and additions: Substantial additions to the rear, in three stages, were constructed within several years, consisting of a small 3-story structure and two 5-story buildings, all contiguous. (See Sketch Map.) A 1952 newspaper clipping<sup>5</sup> refers to plans for the "annex" dated October 1888 without specifying whether all three buildings were included and without mentioning the architect, if any. In any event, the entire rear portion as it exists today, appears in the 1895 Sanborn map.<sup>6</sup>

McKim, Mead & White prepared plans in 1907 for the remodeling of the structure to become the City Hall.<sup>7</sup> The work consisted of re-arranging the interior space. Construction of the alterations was carried out in 1908-09 at a cost of \$31,376.91.<sup>8</sup>

Messrs Russell and Erwin also owned the 3-story building to the west of the Russell & Erwin Building, with the ground floor leased to the Post Office, and sold it to the City along with the rest of the property. The City later acquired the 2-story building to the east. In all, six buildings now function together as the City Hall complex. (See Sketch Map.)

#### B. Historical Context:

New Britain's hardware industry developed from early, small-scale manufacture of tineware and brass goods. By mid-19th century the important firms of Russell & Erwin, the Stanley Works, and P. & F. Corbin had been formed. As these factories grew during the third quarter of the 19th century, the center of town shifted eastward from its original location to the neighborhood of the factories and Central Park.

When Henry E. Russell, Sr., and Cornelius B. Erwin of Russell & Erwin Manufacturing Co. decided to build a business block suitable to New Britain's emerging prosperity, they selected McKim, Mead & White as their architects. Presumably, the contact with the firm was made through Charles L. Mead, president of Stanley Rule & Level Co. (later part of the Stanley Works) whose brother was William Rutherford Mead of McKim, Mead & White.

As a location for their new building, Russell and Erwin selected a site in the emerging center of activity on West Main Street facing south toward Central Park, between two existing buildings, the New Britain National Bank (1860) on the right and the Post Office (1870) on the left. This location has continued to be the center of activity in downtown New Britain,

and is eminently suitable as the site of City Hall.

Part of the purpose Russell and Erwin had in mind when planning their new block was to provide accommodation for visitors from New York who came to their plant. Accordingly, part of the block was devoted to hotel facilities including a dozen or more guest rooms, operated by a leasee as the Russwin Hotel. The City rented some office space in the new building, and other tenants included the New Britain Institute (a library), the Masons and the New Britain Club on the upper floors, as well as stores on the ground floor.

The record suggests that the hotel was an immediate success, leading to construction of the 5-story Russwin Annex in 1888. But apparently the hotel's success was short lived for one leasee followed another and the quality of the operation deteriorated. In 1907 the press reported that the building's owners were "keeping the hotel open out of sheer civic pride and philanthropy."<sup>9</sup> At that time the City which until then had not owned a City Hall was considering several properties for the purpose. The Russell & Erwin block was available at an attractive price, and was purchased.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. Description of Exterior:

As the Russell & Erwin Building abuts adjacent structures, most of its exterior architectural qualities are found on the facade. The facade is constructed of brownstone on the first two stories and brick on the upper three stories and is topped by a hipped roof of pantiles. The five arched openings of the first floor, alternating large and small in size, repeat similar arches from the bank building to the right. The tympani of the arched openings have Dioclesian windows except for the central opening, the entrance to the building, which has an elaborate wrought-iron screen incorporating the seal of the City. The second floor has rectangular paired and single windows. Above the second-floor windows, the brownstone terminates with an embellished frieze and molded cornice. A wrought-iron balcony is supported by carved stone consoles above the central three windows.

The third- and fourth-floor windows are linked by recessed spandrels and projecting piers. The piers support round arches over the fourth-floor windows, forming a 2-story arcade. The spacing of piers and windows provides two wide arches on the left and right, and, in the center, five arches alternating wide and narrow. The size of the windows varies according to the size of the arches. Decorative details include the anthemion capitals of the piers, roundels in the spandrels between the third- and fourth-floor windows and in the spandrels between the arches, and guilloches between parallel torus mold-

ings that form the arches. All of this decorative detail is executed in red terra cotta.

A second embellished frieze and cornice with egg-and-dart molding runs across the building above the fourth-floor windows. The fifth-floor windows, placed over the fourth-floor arches, are also arched and have the guilloche moldings as full window surrounds. A large egg-and-dart molding runs above these windows under the wide roof overhang. The hipped roof is covered with red pantiles. Two brick chimneys with molded tops rise from each side wall and one from the rear slope of the roof.

Decorative terra-cotta bands continue around from the facade to the side elevations. The motifs of the facade's pier capitals, cornice below the fifth-floor windows and molding under the eaves extend on the side elevations to the first of the two chimneys, which project from the wall planes. The roof overhang terminates with the second chimney; the roof line from this point continues as a corbel course. In the fourth and fifth stories, above the abutting buildings, there are plain round-headed windows without the guilloche moldings. Similar windows and the corbel-course cornice continue on the back of the building and in the light well. The rear elevation of the wing east of the light well has two cast-iron store fronts at grade and a stepped gable at the roof line. The treatment of the corresponding elevation of the west wing is obscured by the addition to the rear.

The structures that extend to the rear are without architectural pretension. The windows have segmental arches and brownstone sills, a common 19th-century architectural feature in Connecticut.

The horizontal and vertical rhythms of the facade of the Russell & Erwin Building are outstanding. In the judgement of Leland M. Roth, the leading McKim, Mead & White scholar, "The intricate rhythm of the bays of the facade is without parallel for its subtlety and restrained complexity in the commercial architecture of the last half of the nineteenth century in the United States."<sup>10</sup>

The architectural design of the Russell & Erwin Building resembles that of the contemporary Villard Houses (1882-86) on Madison Avenue in New York City, a McKim, Mead & White commission that reflects a strong Wells influence, especially with respect to the Italianate details. At the Russell & Erwin Building Wells' use of terra cotta in such details was highly successful. He was one of the first to appreciate the potential and the longevity of this material. The terra-cotta detailing on the Russell & Erwin Building is as crisp and effective today as when it was built.

B. Description of Interior:

When the Russell & Erwin Building opened, the ground floor was occupied by stores and the hotel dining room and bar. The lobby and other public and meeting rooms, including the library, were on the second floor, with guest rooms and offices on the upper three floors. This change in function was reflected in the change of facade building materials from brownstone for the first two stories to brick for the upper three stories. Many of the rooms had fireplaces with a resulting plethora of chimney pots (still in place) on the roof. There was a hydraulic elevator, the first passenger elevator in the city.

At present a short narrow hallway leads from the street to a small elevator in the original elevator shaft. A stairway winds up around the elevator to the fifth floor. On the lower floors it has a marble dado and marble treads. The second floor still reflects some of its original grandeur with free-standing Tuscan columns, pilasters, dado, door and window surrounds and floor all of white marble.

During the 1970s the ceilings were dropped, fluorescent light fixtures were installed and the plaster walls were covered with plywood paneling. The original 1-over-1, double-hung wooden sash, however, were not disturbed.

C. Site:

The Russell & Erwin Building faces south on West Main Street, a principal downtown thoroughfare, across the street from the top of a small, triangular open space known as Central Park. The chief feature in Central Park is the Civil War monument (1900) designed in the Beaux-Arts style by Ernest Flagg. The open space is dominated and controlled by the building in a fashion reminiscent of the importance of a palazzo to a Venetian square. Wells was successful in adapting not only the architecture of the building but also its urban relationships from the Italian Renaissance model. This sense of authority adds to the stature of the building in its function as City Hall.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings: None known.

B. Early Views: See Cortisses and Walker. Note: The exterior appearance of the building and the adjacent buildings has not changed since the time of construction.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary sources:

New Britain Land Records, vol. 9, p. 103, September 6, 1888, sale of the property by Henry E. Russell to Russwin Corp.

New Britain Land Records, vol. 61, p. 389, June 4, 1907, sale of the property by Russwin Corp. to City of New Britain.

2. Secondary sources:

Cortisses, Royal, Scribner's Magazine, July 1929, pp. 100-108.

The Hartford Courant, September 29, 1952.

New Britain Herald, January 11, 1907, May 15, 1908.

New Britain Observer, May 20, 1884, and weekly 1886.

Roth, Leland M., letter dated September 21, 1972 to City Plan Commission, New Britain.

Sanborn Map of New Britain, New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1895.

Walker, C. Howard, "Jospeh Wells, Architect, 1853-1890," Architectural Record, July 1929, pp. 15-18.

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: McKim, Mead & White records at the New-York Historical Society.

E. Supplemental Material: Roth letter, exhibits, maps, photographs.

1. See attached letter written September 21, 1978 by Leland M. Roth, p. 2. Opening date for the building is not known. The hotel section at least was not open until well into 1886. See New Britain Observer (weekly) for January - March, 1886.

2. Roth, p. 2; Royal Cortisses, Scribner's Magazine, July 1929, p. 107; C. Howard Walker, "Joseph Wells, Architect, 1853-1890," Architectural Record, July 1929, p. 16.

3. See Roth, Cortisses and Walker.

4. New Britain Observer, May 20, 1884, 3:1.

5. The Hartford Courant, September 29, 1952.

6. Sanborn Map of New Britain, New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1895.

7. The partner in charge was Mr. Barott. See New Britain Herald, May 15, 1908.

8. Roth, pp. 2, 3.

9. New Britain Herald, January 11, 1907.
10. Roth, p. 4.

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August 28, 1981

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January 6, 1982



Russell & Erwin Building  
New Britain, CT

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Sketch Map

